Review Outline

A Review of Ang Lee’s Movie “Lust, Caution”

Stephanie Yao, Shanghai, CN (UTC+8), April 1, 2024

"Lust, Caution" (known as "Se, Jie" in Chinese) directed by Ang Lee is a film that evokes mixed feelings. The movie illustrates a miniature of 1940s Shanghai and Hong Kong before and after the Pacific War. The film depicts a group of Chinese university students from The University of Hong Kong who plot to assassinate a high-ranking special agent and recruiter, Mr. Yee, working for the puppet government by luring him into a honey trap. The protagonist Wong Chia Chi devotes herself to lure Mr. Yee but then betrays the government and saves Mr. Yee from being assassinated since she is only being cared for by Mr. Yee instead of anyone else. The film is based on the historical event of Chinese spy Zheng Pingru's failed attempt to assassinate the Japanese collaborator Ding Mocun.

On one hand, the cinematography is breathtaking, capturing the essence of 1940s Shanghai with remarkable attention to detail. The performances, particularly by Tony Leung and Tang Wei, are powerful and deeply nuanced, drawing viewers into the complex world of espionage and desire, in both physical and mental statuses.

Besides, the description and illustration of Mr. Yee and Wong Chia Chi are detailed, providing round characteristics. For example, Mr. Yee holds different attitudes towards his secretary, who is sent by the Japanese government to monitor him, and Wong Chia Chi. The strong contrast between different attitudes implies Mr. Yee’s sincerity towards Wong Chia Chi. Additionally, a large proportion of the movie is used to describe Wong Chia Chi’s insurmountable obstacles – her father, aunt, and friends betrayed her and the government she served did not help her. The obstacles foreshadowed her betraying the government and helping Mr. Yee escape from being assassinated. The concentrated description provides understandable reasonings for the characters’ actions and decisions, and therefore make the plot acceptable and complete.

Different people may have different opinions towards Wong Chia Chi, as she betrayed the official government whom she served just to protect Mr. Yee from being assassinated, which is a direct reason for her death, as shown at the end of the movie. Some people criticize Wong Chia Chi’s values and the decisions she made, while others state this is a result of the comparison between the status of being given up and sacrificed by others and being cared for by Mr. Yee. Remarkably, this movie, and the original novel, are based on the story of Zheng Pingru failing to assassinate Ding Mocun. At the same time it provides authenticity, some people may be misled by the movie and misunderstand Zheng Pingru. Different from Wong Chia Chi, Zheng Pingru did not mean to save Ding Mocun and she sacrificed herself to protect the land and people, who definitely and undoubtedly cared for the country, land and the people more than Wong Chia Chi.

Ultimately, "Lust, Caution" is a film that demands attention and reflection. While its artistic merits are undeniable, its challenging content and pacing may not be to everyone's taste. It's a film that leaves a lasting impression, for better or for worse, depending on individual sensibilities.